

FISHING

Nothing fishy about Briton's big cat

Brian Clarke is amazed to find an angler who understated his world-record catch

THE report in this and other newspapers last month that a man from Surrey had landed the biggest freshwater fish ever taken by a Briton, and that the catfish in question was also a record for Spain, where it was caught, was that most disorientating of fishy stories: an understatement.

Now understatement is not an easy concept for anglers. Many have to lie down when they hear of it. It is why, today, I apologise on behalf of the media and put the record right, why I acknowledge that if we cannot exaggerate a fishing story in the way our angling readers have every right to expect, then certainly we should not sell it short. The least I can do now — it is a concept angling correspondents, in particular, grapple with — is to let the facts speak for themselves.

And so to it. The 212lb wels catfish taken by Duncan Rooke, of Woking, from the River Ebro this summer was indeed the biggest freshwater fish landed by a British angler and was indeed a Spanish record for the species, as we all correctly reported. What we all missed was that Rooke's fish was not simply a Spanish record, but also a world record.

Moreover, days later, the same British professional angler who guided Rooke to his whopper, independently guided another British angler to a 205lb fish that likewise broke the existing official record.

This second angler, when he might have come from anywhere in the world, as Ebro fishers do, incredibly also came from Woking. The record both men broke, held by a 202lb fish caught in Kazakhstan in 1999, had been caught by a third British angler, a dedicated specimen-hunter who had travelled to Asia in his search for such a monster.

Finally, lest it be thought that these things are ten-a-penny among British anglers, the record for the wels catfish is the only world record for any species known to have been held by a Briton in recent times.



Wels done: Rooke, left, and his guide, Buss, cradle their 212lb world record catfish from the Ebro. The fish was returned alive

So now what do we have? We have not just one whopping catfish being caught by one British angler, but a veritable catfish saga. "Briton breaks Spanish catfish record" or whatever? Bah! I mean, understatement or what?

As it happens, Britons have made the pursuit of mega-moggies something of a speciality in recent years, especially from the Ebro. Forty years ago, the Ebro was just one more river idling through the Spanish heat as though *mañana* were just another day. Then some German anglers put a few catfish into the river to see how they would get on — and they got on very well.

According to Simon Clarke, secretary of the Catfish Society, conditions in the Ebro proved perfect. First, the river, which runs through northeast Spain into the Mediterranean near Barcelona, is a huge river that is stuffed with food — including carp, which catfish hunt and scavenge. More important, Clarke says, the water is warm the year around, enabling the catfish to feed and grow for 11 months of the year instead of just in summer, as in Britain.

MEGA MOGGIES

■ The wels (*Silurus glanis*) is widely distributed in mainland Europe and is commercially fished, primarily in and around the Danube. It eats shellfish, fish, carrion and waterfowl.

■ The biggest to be caught commercially weighed 440lb. The species was introduced to Britain by the Duke of Bedford in 1880 and is now in 250 waters. The UK rod-caught record is 62lb.

■ Rooke's Ebro fish was caught on a string of halibut pellets (a high-protein fish bait the size of a conker).

Some years after their introduction, local anglers began to find numbers of big catfish around the town of Mequinenza, a couple of hours inland from Barcelona. News spread, anglers flocked to the Ebro's sun-soaked banks and now Mequinenza finds itself the Torremolinos of the catfish world.

Around 2,000 British anglers are among the tens of thousands who go there every year. Demand is such that hundreds of professional anglers work

the river as guides, locating the biggest fish, developing the best means of catching them and then charging clients up to £400 a day to be put on the bankside in the right place, hopefully at the right time.

Stephen Buss, a 30-year-old guide whose parents live in Bordon, Hampshire, is the man behind the latest batch of whoppers. Buss was employed as a professional guide for the first time last year and, in 44 visits to the Ebro, he has helped clients to catch 228 catfish, 116 of them over 100lb, 22 of them over 150lb.

This year, Buss founded his own company, Carp and Cat Busters, and in addition to banking scores over 100lb has had several close to 200lb.

In the vastness of the Ebro — it is hundreds of metres wide in places and up to 50 metres deep — the only way to catch whopping fish with regularity is to attract them to where you want them to be.

The standard technique is to drop vast quantities of fish-food pellets into one small area, to cast the hook-bait among them and then to await the arm-wrenching bite which, for

Buss and his clients at least, seems to come.

And so there we have it: the unadorned background to the great catfish understatement. Of course, the fact that a fish becomes an official world record does not mean that it is the biggest specimen of its kind ever taken. Plenty of potential records go unclaimed for one reason or another. But in today's context, none of that really matters. None of it will satisfy anglers still reeling from understatement, perhaps having encountered it for the first time in their lives.

A British-caught fish that meets all record criteria — weighed, witnessed, no hanky-panky world record that merely awaits formal ratification — promptly followed by another, both of them landed with the help of the same British guide on top of a British record that had stood for six years, is a package that should get the recognition it deserves. The mega-moggie facts should be allowed to speak for themselves.

And now they have.
■ Brian Clarke's angling column appears on the first Monday of each month.